

Health, safety and young people

a UNISON guide for members



UNISON recognises that everyone has an equal right to protection from harm at work, but that doesn't mean treating everyone as if they were all the same.

As a young member of UNISON you make up around 5% of our membership. Being a younger worker means you may deal with issues like bullying and harassment in a different way to your older colleagues. You may also find that an extended working life may affect your body in ways that may not be fully understood.

This booklet highlights some of these issues, and what you can expect from your employer to help you stay safe and well in the world of work.

Being new to the workforce

No one should be put at unnecessary risk at work. Work related death, injuries, and ill-health are not acceptable and are mostly avoidable.

The Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) requires employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all their staff, plus any others who may be affected, such as service users and visitors. It's not only the right thing to do – it's the law.

The main way employers should do this is by carrying out proper risk assessments. The safety of employees, visitors, and the public depend on this and it is a legal requirement under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (The Management Regs).

When they are doing their risk assessments employers should take into account the fact that younger employees are often new to the workforce with less work experience.

Risk assessment

There are five steps to risk assessment:

1. identify the hazards
2. decide who might be harmed and how
3. assess the risks and identify ways to avoid or reduce that risk
4. record and apply the findings
5. review the risk assessment and update it as necessary.

Risk assessments should also make provision for “vulnerable” people such as young workers and/or pregnant women when assessing the risks.

Possible risks in the workplace

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) cover a range of conditions affecting the bones or soft tissues (including muscles, tendons, and ligaments) of the skeletal joints in our bodies. MSDs may cause pain or discomfort and could either limit the use of the affected parts of the body or limit the activities you can do.

Aches, pains, and strains are a common experience, especially after physical exertion more than – or different to – usual, but our bodies usually recover after a few days. However, repeated exposure to the hazards that cause these aches, pains, and strains – or asking our bodies to do too much – can lead to serious, long-term, or permanent injury or disability.

Being a young worker means that some of your bones and muscles may not be fully formed and not quite at full strength. Or you may be exposed to risks – such as display screen equipment use from a young age – that we have yet to fully understand.

MSDs can happen when:

- our work requires us to move constantly, too fast, or not enough
- you are carrying or lifting too much or too often
- you are standing or sitting for too long.

The human body is designed to move, but also needs to rest, so repeated movements, prolonged inertia, or asking it to do too much can wear it out.

However, MSDs and the accompanying aches, pains, and strains can be prevented or minimised, just like all other work-related injury or ill-health. Employers should use the process of risk assessment to do this

Employers should also ensure that all workers have adequate information, training and especially supervision (for young workers) to make sure that no long-term damage is done to their bodies as a result of the work they do.

Stress (and mental health)

Stress is one of the biggest causes of health problems in the workplace. In general terms, stress is a reaction to pressure or harassment at work.

The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) definition of stress is: "The reaction people have to excessive demands or pressures, arising when people try to cope with tasks, responsibilities or other types of pressure connected with their job, but find difficulty, strain or worry in doing so."

Stress can be difficult to identify in an organisation as employees may not admit to feeling stressed.

What causes stress?

Stress at work can be caused by many things or even a combination of things, such as:

- long hours and shift work
- lack of control or insecurity
- lack of job satisfaction, boredom, or isolation
- fear of violence, bullying or harassment
- bad relations with other work colleagues
- problems with the working environment (such as noise, temperature, overcrowding and poor facilities)
- low pay.

Stress is also a gateway to other mental health conditions – so employers should risk assess it in the same way they do every other workplace hazard.

Other mental health conditions should also be considered along with conditions made worse by work (like stress, anxiety, or depression) as they may have an impact both on the way people work and the people they work with – such as patients, clients, and the public.

As a young member, who is new to the work arena, stress may have a significant impact on your own personal well-being and how you cope with work. Employers should manage work so as not to harm you and ensure all staff have the support they need to cope with the reasonable demands of the job.

Bullying and harassment

UNISON believes that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect at work. Bullying is totally unacceptable behaviour as it denies staff this right. Bullying at work is a major workplace problem that makes the daily working lives of many workers intolerable.

What is bullying?

Bullying includes:

- offensive, intimidating, malicious, or insulting behaviour
- abuse of authority which violates the dignity of an individual or a group of people
- creating a hostile environment against an individual
- the undermining, humiliation, or injury of an individual.

The bullying does not need to relate to a protected characteristic (discussed below).

What is harassment?

Harassment is defined as unwanted conduct that has the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of people in the workplace or of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Harassment includes bullying if it relates to one of the protected characteristics listed above.

A key factor in determining whether harassment has occurred is whether the actions or comments are **viewed as demeaning and unacceptable to the recipient**.

A few examples of bullying/harassment could include:

- making offensive, intimidating or derogatory comments (including those comments explained as “banter”)
- withholding information so the job cannot be done properly
- unreasonable or impossible deadlines or workloads
- overbearing supervision or unjust criticism
- blocking opportunities or making threats about job security.

Many young members face bullying and harassment at work – but don't know what to do about it. If you think you have been subjected to this behaviour at work (or even outside of work, by work colleagues), you should:

- keep a written record or diary of all bullying incidents, including past incidents – no matter how small they appear. You may even see a pattern emerging
- speak to your UNISON rep
- speak to the bully or harasser (if you feel able to). They may not have realised how distressing their actions are to you – if unable, consider asking your safety rep, steward, or a colleague to raise it on your behalf
- speak to or formally raise with your employer – your UNISON safety rep or steward, may be able to advise you on the best way of doing so, may accompany you to any meetings with your employer, or raise it with them on your behalf.

To find out more about bullying and harassment and the impact on young people please see our member booklet – stock number 3916.

Longer working life

Young workers are entering the world of work at a time when there is no defined age to retire. State pension age is increasing – which means you could have a 50 to 55-year work span – and technology is changing at a rapid rate, bringing with it risks that have never been faced by workers before.

Things to consider as we move to working over such a long time span include:

- stress and its effects on mental health and well-being
- accidents at work and ensuring full recovery from any injuries so they do not cause problems later on in life or at times when we are more vulnerable (younger, older, pregnant, etc)
- musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and ensuring bad practices are eliminated to prevent problems later on in life
- shift work and the effects on sleep, rest and physical/mental recovery and associated diseases that may arise due to unconventional work patterns.

You should alert your employers to any problems at work as soon as possible so that they can put systems in place to keep you safe at work.

What next?

If you believe that your employer isn't taking your issues seriously or doing enough to support you, speak to your UNISON safety rep.

You could also consider becoming a safety rep to make sure that your voice and other young members are heard when your employer is making decisions that could affect your health, safety and welfare at work. If you are interested and want to find out more - speak to someone in your branch – like your branch health and safety officer or branch secretary, or call UNISON on 0800 0 857 857.

Other resources

Health and safety knowledge pages – unison.org.uk/safety

Available from the UNISON online catalogue – unison.org.uk/catalogue

Safety rep guides

Bullying at Work guide (stock number 1281)

Harassment at Work guide (stock number 1359)

Safety Reps guide (stock number 1684)

Are you sitting comfortably – UNISON guide on posture at work (stock number 2692)

Member booklets

Are you at risk? – booklet for members explaining risk assessment (stock number 2720).

Aches pains and strains (stock number 3863)

Resilience and well-being (stock number 3691)

Respect me! A guide for young workers on bullying and harassment (stock number 3916)

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